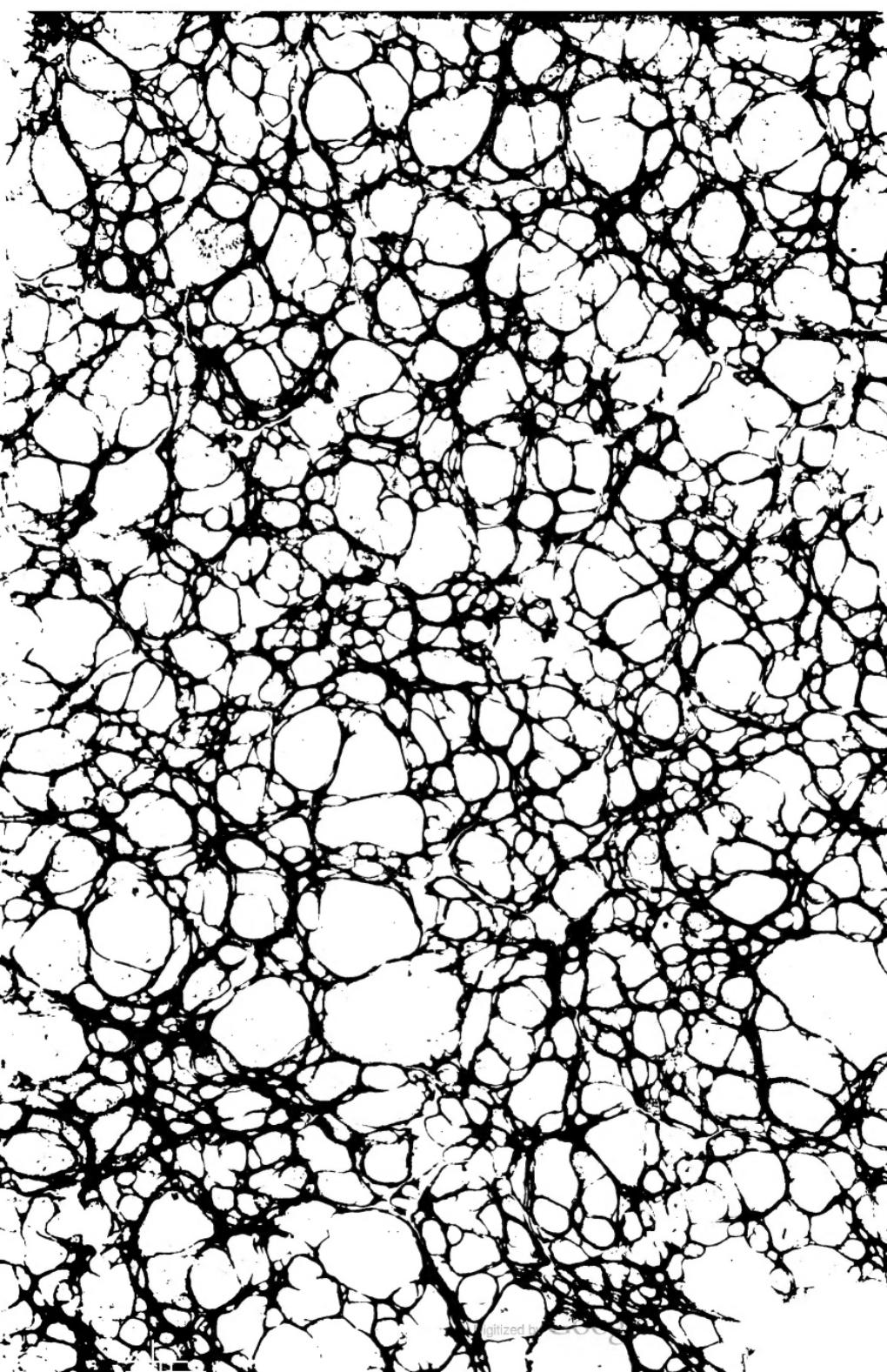


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THE  
Present State  
OF  
WIT,  
IN A  
LETTER  
TO A  
Friend in the Country.

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L O N D O N

Printed in the Year, MDCCXI.



THE  
**Present State**  
 OF  
**WIT, &c.**

SIR,

**Y**OU Acquaint me in your last, that you are still so busie Building at \_\_\_\_\_, that your Friends must not hope to see you in Town this Year : At the same time you desire me that you may not be quite at a loss in Conversation among the *Beau Monde* next Winter, to send you an account of the present State of Wit in Town ; which, without further Preface, I shall therefore endeavour to perform, and give

give you the Histories and Characters of all our *Periodical Papers*, whether Monthly, Weekly, or Diurnal; with the same freedom I used to send you our other Town News.

I shall only premise, that as you know I never cared one Earthing either for *Whig* or *Tory*; So I shall consider our Writers purely as they are such, without any respect to which Party they may belong.

*Dr. King* has for some time lain down his *Monthly Philosophical Transactions*, which the Title Page informed us at first, were only to be continued as they Sold ; and tho' that Gentleman has a World of Wit, yet as it lies in one particular way of Raillery, the Town soon grew weary of his Writings ; tho' I cannot but think, that their Author deserves a much better Fate, than to Languish out the small remainder of his Life in the *Fleet Prison*.

About the same time that the Doctor left off Writing, one Mr. Ozell put out his *Monthly Amusement*, (which is

is still continued) and as it is generally some *French* Novel or Play indifferently Translated, is more or less taken Notice of, as the Original Piece is more or less Agreeable.

As to our Weekly Papers, the *Poor Review* is quite exhausted, and grown so very Contemptible, that tho' he has provoked all his Brothers of the Quill round, none of them will enter into a Controversy with him. This Fellow, who had excellent Natural Parts, but wanted a small Foundation of Learning, is a lively instance of those Wits, who, as *An Ingenious Author* says, will endure *But one Skimthing*.

*The Observator* was almost in the same Condition, but since our Party-struggles have run so high, he is much mended for the better, which is imputed to the Charitable Assistance of some out-lying Friends.

These Two Authors might, however, have flourish'd some time longer, had not the Controversie been

been taken up by much abler Hands.

*The Examiner* is a Paper, which all Men, who speak without Prejudice, allow to be well Writ. Tho' his Subject will admit of no great Variety, he is continually placing it on so many different Lights, and endeavouring to inculcate the same thing by so many Beautiful Changes of Expressions, that Men, who are concern'd in no Party, may Read him with Pleasure. His way of assuming the Question in Debate, is extremely Artful; and his Letter to *Crassus*, is, I think, a Master-piece. As these Papers are suppos'd to have been Writ by several Hands, the Criticks will tell you, That they can discern a difference in their Stiles and Beauties, and pretend to observe, that the first *Examiners* abound chiefly in Wit, the last in Humpur.

Soon after their first appearance, came out a Paper from the other Side, called the *Whig Examiner*, writ with so much Fire, and in so excellent a Stile,

Stile, as put the *Tories* in no small pain for their favourite Hero, every one cry'd *Bickerstaff* must be the Author, and People were the more confirm'd in this opinion, upon its being so soon lay'd down; which seem'd to shew, that it was only writ to biad the *Examiners* to their good Behaviour, and was never design'd to be a Weekly Paper. The *Examiners* therefore have no one to Combat with at present, but their Friend the *Medley*; The Author of which Paper, tho' he seems to be a Man of good Sense, and expresses it luckily enough now and then, is, I think, for the most part, perfectly a Stranger to fine Writing.

I presume I need not tell you that the *Examiner* carries much the more Sail, as 'tis supposed to be writ by the Direction, and under the Eye of some Great Persons who sit at the helm of Affairs, and is consequently look'd on as a sort of publick Notice which way they are steering us.



The reputed Author is Dr. S—t, with the assistance, sometimes, of Dr. Att—y, and Mr. P—r.

*The Medley*, is said to be Writ by Mr. Old—n, and supervised by Mr. Mayn—g, who perhaps might intirely write those few Papers which are so much better than the rest.

Before I proceed further in the account of our Weekly Papers, it will be necessary to inform you, that at the begining of the Winter, to the infinite surprize of all Men, Mr. Steele flung up *His Tatler*, and instead of Isaac Bickerstaff Esq; Subscrib'd himself Richard Steele to the last of those Papers, after an handsome Compliment to the Town for their kind acceptance of his Endeavours to divert them. The Chief Reason he thought fit to give for his leaving off writing, was, that having been so long look'd on in all publick Places and Companies as the Author of those Papers, he found that his most intimate Friends and Acquaintance were in Pain to Act or Speak before him.

him. The Town was very far from being satisfied with this Reason; and most People judg'd the true cause to be, either that he was quite spent, and wanted matter to continue his undertaking any longer, or that he lay'd it down as a sort of Submission to, and Composition with the Government for some past Offences; Or lastly, that he had a Mind to vary his Shape; and appear again in some new Light.

However that were, his disappearing seem'd to be bewailed as some general Calamity, every one wanted so agreeable an Amusement, and the Coffee-houses began to be sensible that the Esquires Lucubrations alone, had brought them more Customers than all their other News Papers put together.

It must indeed be confess'd, that never Man threw up his Pen under Stronger Temptations to have implored it longer: His Reputation was at a greater height than, I believe, ever any living Author's was before him. 'Tis reasonable to suppose that

his Gains were proportionably considerable; Every one Read him with Pleasure and Good Will , and the *Tories*, in respect to his other Good Qualities, had almost forgiven his unaccountable Imprudence in declaring against them.

Lastly, It was highly improbable that if he threw off a Character, the Ideas of which were so strongly impress'd in every one's mind, however finely he might write in any new form, that he should meet with the same reception.

To give you my own thoughts of this Gentleman's Writings, I shall in the first place observe, that there is this noble difference between him and all the rest of our Polite and Gallant Authors: The latter have endeavour'd to please the Age by falling in with them, and encouraging them in their fashionable Vices, and false notions of things. It would have been a jest, sometime since, for a Man to have affersetted, that any thing Witty could be said in praise of a Marry'd State, or that Devotion and Virtue were

were any way necessary to the Character of a fine Gentleman. *Bickerstaff* ventur'd to tell the Town, that they were a parcel of Fops, Fools, and vain Cocquets; but in such a manner, as even pleased them, and made them more than half enclin'd to believe that he spoke Truth.

Instead of complying with the false Sentiments or Vicious tafts of the Age, either in Morality, Criticism, or Good Breeding, he has boldly assur'd them, that they were altogether in the wrong, and commanded them with an Authority, which perfectly well became him, to surrender themselves to his Arguments, for Virtue and Good Sense.

'Tis incredible to conceive the effect his Writings have had on the Town; How many Thousand follies they have either quite banish'd, or given a very great check to; how much Countenance they have added to Virtue and Religion; how many People they have render'd happy, by shewing them it was their own fault if they were not so; and lastly, how intirely they



they have convinc'd our Fops, and Young Fellows, of the value and advantages of Learning.

He has indeed rescued it out of the hands of Pedants and Fools, and discover'd the true method of making it amiable and lovely to all mankind: In the dress he gives it, 'tis a most welcome guest at Tea-tables and Assemblies, and is relish'd and caress'd by the Merchants on the Change; accordingly, there is not a Lady at Court, nor a Banker in *Lumbard-Street*, who is not verily perswaded, that *Captain Steele* is the greatest Scholar, and best Casuist, of any Man in *England*.

Lastly, His Writings have set all our Wits and Men of Letters upon a new way of Thinking, of which they had hitherto no Notion before; and tho' we cannot yet say that any of them have come up to the Beauties of the Original, I think we may venture to affirm, that every one of them Writes and Thinks much more justly than they did some time since.

The vast variety of Subjects which he has treated of in so different manners, and yet All so perfectly well, made the World believe that 'twas impossible they should all come from the same hand. This set every one upon guessing who was the Esquires Friend, and most people at first fancied it must be Dr. Swift; but it is now no longer a Secret, that his only great and constant assistant was Mr. Addison.

This is that excellent Friend to whom Mr. Steele ow's so much, and who refuses to have his Name set before thofe Pieces, which the greatest Pens in *England* would be Proud to own. Indeed, they could hardly add to this Gentleman's Reputation, whose Works in *Latin* and *English* Poetry, long since convinc'd the World, that he was the greatest Master in *Europe* of thofe Two Languages.

I am assur'd from good hands, That all the *Visions*, and other Tracts in that way of Writing, with a very great number of the most exquisite Pieces of Wit and Raillery throughout

out the Lucubrations, are intirely of this Gentleman's Composing ; which may in some Measure account for that different Genius, which appears in the Winter Papers from those of the Summer ; at which time, as the *Examiner* often hinted, this Friend of Mr. Steele's was in Ireland.

Mr. Steele confesses in his last Volume of the *Tatlers*, that he is oblig'd to Dr. Swift for his *Town Shower*, and the *Description of the Morn*, with some other hints receiv'd from him in Private Conversation.

I have also heard, that several of those Letters, which came as from Unknown Hands, were writ by Mr. Hentz ; which is an Answer to your Query, Who those Friends are, whom Mr. Steele speaks of in his last *Tatter* ?

But to proceed with my account of our other Papers : The Expiration of Bickerstaff's *Lucubrations*, was attended with much the same Consequences as the Death of Meliboeus's Ox in *Virgil* ; as the latter engendred Swarms

Swarms of Bees, the former immediately produc'd whole Swarms of little Satirical Scribblers.

One of these Authors, call'd himself *The Growler*, and assur'd us, that to make amends for Mr. Steel's Silence, he was resolv'd to *Growl* at us Weekly, as long as we should think fit to give him any Encouragement. Another Gentleman, with more Modesty, call'd his Paper *The Whisperer*; and a Third, to Please the Ladies, Christen'd his, *The Tell-Tale*.

At the same time came out several *Tatlers*; each of which, with equal Truth and Wit, assur'd us, That he was the Genuine *Isaac Bickerstaff*.

It may be observ'd, That when the Esquire laid down his Pen, tho' he could not but foresee that several Scribblers would soon snatch it up, which he might, one would think, easily have prevented, he Scorn'd to take any further Care about it, but left the Field fairly open to any

C

Worthy

Worthy Successor. Immediately some of our Wits wre for forming themselves into a Club, headed by one Mr. *Harrison*, and trying how they could shooe in this Bow of *Ulysses*; but soon found that this sort of Writing, requires so fine and particular a manner of Thinking, with so exact a Knowledge of the World, as must make them utterly Despair of Success.

They seem'd indeed at first to think, that what was only the *Garnish* of the former *Tatlers*, was that which recomended them, and not those *Substantial Entertainments* which they every were abound in.

Accordingly they were continually talking of their *Maid*, *Night-Cap*, *Spectacles*, and *Charles Lillie*. However there were now and then some faint endeavours at Humour and *Sparks* of Wit, which the Town, for want of better Entertainment, was content to hunt after, through an heap of Impertinencies; but even those are at present, become wholly invisible, and quite swallow'd up in the *Blaze of the Spectator*.

You

You may remember I told you before, that one Cause assign'd for the laying down the *Tatler* was, want of Matter ; and indeed this was the prevailing Opinion in Town, when we were Surpriz'd all at once by a Paper called *The Spectator*, which was promised to be continued every day, and was writ in so excellent a Stile, with so nice a Judgment, and such a noble profusion of Wit and Humour, that it was not difficult to determine it could come from no other hands but those which had penn'd the *Luxuriations*.

This immediately alarm'd these Gentlemen, who ( as 'tis said Mr. Steele phrases it ) had *The Censorship in Commission*. They found the new *Spectator* come on like a Torrent and swept away all before him ; they despaired ever to equal him in Wit, Humour, or Learning ; ( which had been their true and certain way of opposing him ) and therefore, rather chose to fall on the Author, and to call out for help to all Good Christians, by assuring them again and again, that they were the First, Original,

True, and Undisputed. *Isaac Bickerstaff.*

Mean while *The Spectator*, whom we regard as our shelter from that Flood of False Wit and Impertinence which was breaking in upon us, is in every ones Hand, and a constant Topick for our Morning Conversation at Tea-Tables, and Coffee-Houses. We had at first indeed no manner of Notion, how a *Diurnal Paper* could be continu'd in the Spirit and Stile of our present *Spectators*; but to our no small Surprise, we find them still rising upon us, and can only wonder from whence so Prodigious a Run of Wit and Learning can proceed; since some of our best Judges seem to think that they have hitherto, in general, out-shone even the Esquires first *Tatlers*.

Most People Fancy, from their frequency, that they must be compos'd by a Society; I, with all, Assign the first Places to Mr. Steele and *His Friend.*

I have often thought that the Conjunction of those two Great Genius's (who seem to stand in a Class by themselves, so high above all our other Wits) resembled that of two famous States men in a late Reign, whose Characters are very well expressed in their two Mottoes (*viz.*) *Prodeesse quam conspicere*, and *Otium cum Dignitate*. Accordingly the first was continually at work behind the Curtain, drew up and prepared all those Schemes and Designs, which the latter Still drove on, and stood out exposed to the World to receive its Praises or Censures.

Meantime, all our unbyassed well-wishers to Learning, are in hopes, that the known Temper and Prudence of one of these Gentlemen, will hinder the other from ever lashing out into Party, and rend'ring that wit which is at present a Common Good, Odious and Ungrateful to the better part of the Nation.

If this piece of imprudence do's not spoil so excellent a Paper, I propose to my self, the highest Satisfaction, in  
Read-

( 22 )

Reading it with you over a Dish of  
Tea, every Morning next Winter.

As we have yet had nothing new,  
since the *Spectator*, it only remains for  
me to assure you, that I am



Yours, &c.

*Westminster,*  
May 3. 1711.

J. G.

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POST-

## *POSTSCRIPT.*

Upon a Review of my Letter, I find I have quite forgot *The British Apollo*; which might possibly happen, from its having of late Retreated out of this end of the Town into the City; where I am inform'd however, That it still recommends its self by deciding Wagers at Cards, and giving good Advice to the Shop-keepers, and their Apprentices.

## *F I N I S.*





Athenaeum Sept 7, '89

PAMPHLETS BY JOHN GAY

GAY's most important prose piece, the 'Present State of Wit,' bears his initials, J. G. ; but he published several things under the pseudonym of "Sir James Baker," a famous gambler, known as the Knight of the Peak. One of these, 'God's Revenge against Punning,' was published as a single folio sheet in 1716 ; another, published in pamphlet form in 1717, was 'An Admonition Merry and Wise to the famous Mr. Tr[ap]p, on his late Encomiums upon the Bishop of Bangor. For the use of young Divines.' This piece, which is signed at the end "James Baker. From my apartments in Piccadilly, July 2, 1717," and which is concerned with the famous Bangorian controversy, begins : "Men will admire, no doubt, that I, whose taste lies chiefly in what the world calls *belles-lettres*, and whose conversation is known only among the polite and *beau* part of mankind, they will be

stop to examine the nice traits with which Budgell drew a picture or finished a character. But he earnestly desired him, as a gentleman and a Christian, to restore to the right owners the ornaments he had borrowed for the embellishing of any such character ; and then follow phrases which it is suggested that Budgell copied from poems by Pope and Addison, and one, "an emanation of the mind," from Gay's own poem on the landing of the Princess.

And charms are emanations of the mind.

Budgell said he would flatter no great man ; let him avoid also the other extreme, and remember that Sorbiere, who spoke scurrilously of the English, and loaded the French king with eulogiums, was, instead of being rewarded, dismissed from his places and banished by King Lewis. If Budgell answered this piece, he was warned not to go into private family questions ; "if ladies' reputations suffer,—Bilbao or Bastinado is the word." Gay was about to publish a translation of the 'School of Honour,' from the Spanish — a book which, among other things, contained excellent rules as to when a man should draw his pen and his purse as well as his sword. When this book was known, he hoped that, these rules being generally read and observed, "many of his Majesty's lay subjects may be rather inclined to pay their taxes than their lawyers ; and the ecclesiastics taught not to waste their precious time, now more particularly employed for the prosperity and security of Great Britain, and the general peace of Europe ; waste it, I say, in hearing and determining their controversies."

So ends Gay's 'Letter' ; but there is at the end a "N.B." : "Next term I shall publish my Critical Remarks on some heterodox Opinions relating to the present State of the Diet in England : Wherein I have examined the Intrigues of the Oliolists, and used my honest endeavours to reconcile the long quarrel between the different sects of the Surloiners and the Hodg-podgians."

G. A. AITKIN



initiatory harangue was not unknown to many, and how he was soon deposed from his imaginary government ; but did he thereupon (like Budgell) give the world an inventory of his qualifications ? No ; he knew, to quote from Budgell, " how indecent it was for a man to say or write anything to his own advantage." And then Gay remarks that he shall find no place more à propos to acquaint the public that he had contrived, with vast study, a vehicle which would preserve tripe and sheep's-trotters sweet and fresh to any part of the world ; he was determined, in spite of great offers from the Dutch, that his own country should enjoy the benefit of the invention ; but " whether I shall proceed by Patent or Subscription I shall be much guided by you, and that ingenious projector and wit, A[aro]n H[ill], Esq. ; who lately invented the making oil of beech-mast."

After this jest about the Fish-Pool, Gay assured his readers that neither Mr. Webster had given him a cast of his office, nor the Duke of Bolton a regale at his table ; and he had not applied for any of Budgell's places, though he was told there was good picking and choosing among them. He would not write any man out of his place in hopes to get it, and though he differed from Budgell in some things, he should always preserve a regard for him, as he was the nearest relation of Mr. Addison, and the best friend of Mrs. ——. Then follow criticisms upon several passages in Budgell's ' Letter,' which it is not necessary to dwell upon. " I would beg leave to propose to Mr. Accomptant Mr. Ad[disco]n's great moderation of temper and speech in public assemblies, when Mr. Accomptant stands up in his place in the House of C—s." His bookseller, Gay says, was pressing him to finish two great works which he had on hand, before the *beau monde* was entirely taken up with Heidegger's assemblies and masquerades, so he could not



